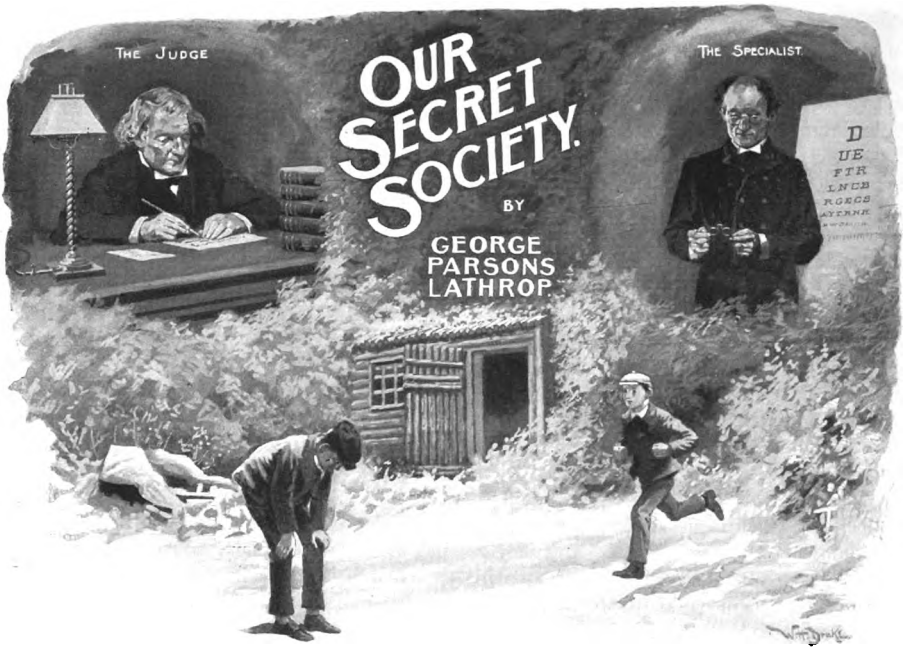

It was near Gallows Lane, and the Judge of Probate was playing leap-frog with the Specialist in Diseases of the Eye, in front of our little Hidden Hut, while the Bank Director and the President of the Gas Company were off scouting in the dense woods to guard against surprise from imaginary Indians.

The woods were really very dense and dark, even on that midsummer day, but the danger from Indians was not at all real. Nevertheless, we regretted the absence of our valued colleague, the prosperous Hardware Merchant, who, we were confident, would effectually have defended our rear. Unfortunately the Hardware Merchant was unable to be with us, having been "kept in" after school because of unruly conduct and of gross failure in his arithmetic lessons. (He rarely makes any mistake in his arithmetic, now; or, if he does, his customers exact no penalty.)

Of course we did not know him as a hardware merchant, then. Neither was the Judge of Probate a judge, at that time. He was simply Bob Hanks; a sprightly, wiry lad of thirteen, full of fun and very larky. Nor had the Specialist in Diseases of the Eye chosen his profession as yet, being known, to a limited youthful public only, as "Rat" Burnham, his complete first name being Ratcliffe. We were boys, and did not know enough to call each other by the titles of our future occupations or business pursuits. But our situation *as* boys was, in our opinion, deep, dark, and murky; for a crisis impended and the Hidden Hut stood in peril.

The whole thing began with the President of the Gas Company — I mean Lorenzo Paul. Such was his romantic name, and his ideas were romantic enough to match it. He it was who first, incited by Cooper's novels which we had all been reading, drew for us ideal pictures and diagrams of cave-shelters, something like that which Deerslayer made use of at Glen's Falls, and then of more elaborate and fantastic underground dwellings. He drew careful designs of these abodes on his slate.

All these plans conformed to one general model. An opening in the earth was con-

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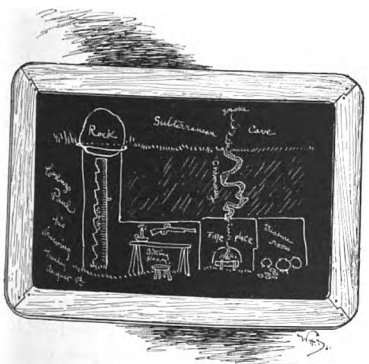
cealed by a solid, but loose and tottering, granite boulder, which turned easily on its base and could be moved aside at a touch by one who knew just how. Under this stone a shaft plunged blackly down into the darkness. Access to the foot of the shaft could be had only by an upright log in which rude steps were notched. But, once at the bottom, you found ample excavated apartments, dimly lighted with candles, at your disposal. In one room, too, there was a fireplace for warmth and cooking, with a flue leading up through the solid rock, so tortuously crooked that no enemy could ever come down through the chimney—and probably no smoke could ever have gone up by it. Had we actually been able to construct that ideal cavern, we would have been stifled with smoke of our own making, the fumes of our own hearth-fire.

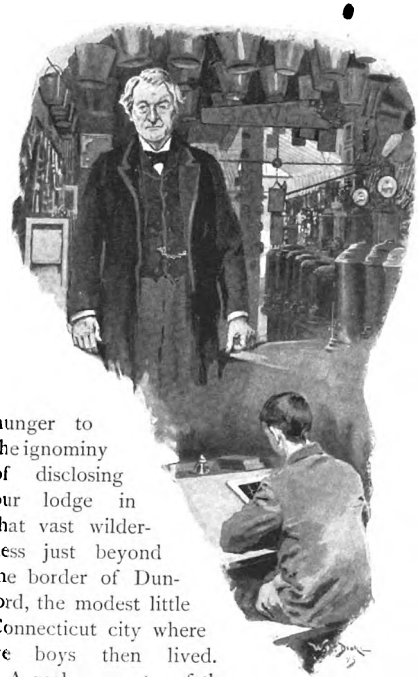
The realization of that sooty dream was beyond our power. And so we contented ourselves with building a hidden hut in the woods, near a rocky cliff.

In this way Our Secret Society came into existence. Having a retreat of this very evasive character, it became necessary that we ourselves should be extremely devious and furtive. We resolved to steep ourselves in a profound mystery; and we succeeded. No one, beyond the limits of our small and exclusive brother-



LORENZO PAUL'S DIAGRAM OF THE IDEAL CAVE.

hood, ever gained knowledge of the damp and earthy lair we had established, because, when we went to the afternoon session of school, we always provided ourselves with an extra luncheon in our inside coat pockets, and so were able to make the three-mile run to our hut in the woods, when the classes were dismissed, without any fear of starvation at the end of the route. Therefore we were never reduced by hunger to the ignominy of disclosing our lodge in that vast wilderness just beyond the border of Dunford, the modest little Connecticut city where we boys then lived.



THE HARDWARE MERCHANT IS KEPT IN.

A real paymaster of the navy had given us an old tin box from the United States war-ship "Sabine," duly marked with Uncle Sam's initials in white paint; and we filled it with remarkable mementos—such as tops, balls, twine, battered coins which we had found by experience could not be "passed" even upon the most indigent tradesman in town, and almanacs of the period. Then we buried it in the soil. This box we exhumed at intervals, with solemn rites; and no one among outsiders was aware either that we had buried or had exhumed it—a fact which we viewed as an extraordinary triumph of mysteriousness.

But, on this particular day, there was danger! We feared that our parents had "struck the trail," and might discover and destroy our secluded cabin. That was why our Bank Director and our President of the Gas Company

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were scouting through the shadowy woods, to ward off Indians. The Bank Director was doing wonderful work in the way of detecting invisible moccasin footprints on the moss or the brown, fallen leaves; and ever and anon the Gas President would pat the earth with his jagged wooden sword, then lift the blade to his nostrils, smell of it attentively, and — with a glare of wild intelligence — dart away through the underbrush in pursuit of some ferocious beast or other foe, whose scent he had discovered by this simple yet astounding process. Both these gallant warriors, likewise, gave token of their sagacity by raising their right hands, arched, to their right ears and listening intently to an incredible number of unheard but alarming noises.

Suddenly a wild whoop resounded through the dark arches of the forest. It came, evidently, from the side toward town, in our rear. Surprise and massacre seemed inevitable; and we doubted whether history had ever shown a more somber page than that which was about to be turned down over *us*. The Judge of Probate and the Specialist in Diseases of the Eye abruptly desisted from their peaceful exercise of leap-frog, and assumed the defensive. The President of the Gas Company and the Bank Director, quite as promptly, abandoned their scouting, and fell back upon the main-line. We were a unit; we were concentrated; but we were in abject terror.

The whoop turned out to be only the Hardware Merchant,— that is, Willard Jones,— who, having worked out his term of enforced confinement after school hours, had decided to give us a practical illustration of the ease with which we might be taken unawares and surrounded by an enemy of one, and perhaps conquered. We did not let the lesson pass unheeded. Thenceforth, each member of the society was subjected to severe tests of fitness. We also, for further discipline and profit, set up a winter lodge in one of the back yards of the city itself — a wigwam constructed of planks, under the mystic shadow of which we read our novels, and burned slow fires of smoky coal picked up from the winter supply of various houses belonging to our relatives, and to citizens generally. Here we instituted new and special forms of initiation. One of them depended on a rude scrawl of what the society called its "patron saint": the blurry outline of a human figure, painted on a hanging screen at one end of the awesome wigwam. This curtain-picture was smeared with grease or tar, or whatever other compound the society in its wisdom might deem especially unpleasant to the novice; and every candidate for admission was required to kiss it. As he did so, an artful member, concealed behind the curtain, pushed it forward, and enwrapped the candidate's face, so as to daub him thoroughly with the tar or grease. But when he had been once inducted, the new member enjoyed the priceless happiness of smoking with the rest of us a Pipe of Peace, filled with that fragrant herb which the "Sweet Fern Committee" was particularly empowered and commanded to gather all through the summer for winter use.

And here in the wigwam we kept the bones of a pet hen that had inconsiderately died on our hands. For some reason we named this departed fowl "Mrs. Sill"; and we often went through certain dismal ceremonies of honoring her remains, with one of our chief officers acting as master of ritual, in a long gown and a volunteer fireman's huge water-proof hat.

These chief officers were called "willers," and whatsoever they *willed* us to do, that we were obliged to perform. Many were the feats of bravado or humility they forced us to accomplish. But alas for the power and vanity of human "willers"! — the pride of absolute rule led them, finally, to make decree that the winter lodge and all its relics should be destroyed by fire. We met sadly, for that purpose, but obeyed; and the precious little shanty rolled upward to the sky in a brief, black smoke. The Hidden Hut by the cliff in the woods, near Gallows Lane,— actually so named, because a witch had been hanged there in colonial times, — was suffered by our young despots to remain in existence. But as we grew older, and drifted apart into business or college, its uses lapsed and we left it untenanted.

Even so long as ten years afterward, the Judge, the Director, and I went out to visit the sequestered spot, and found a considerable part of our little structure still holding together

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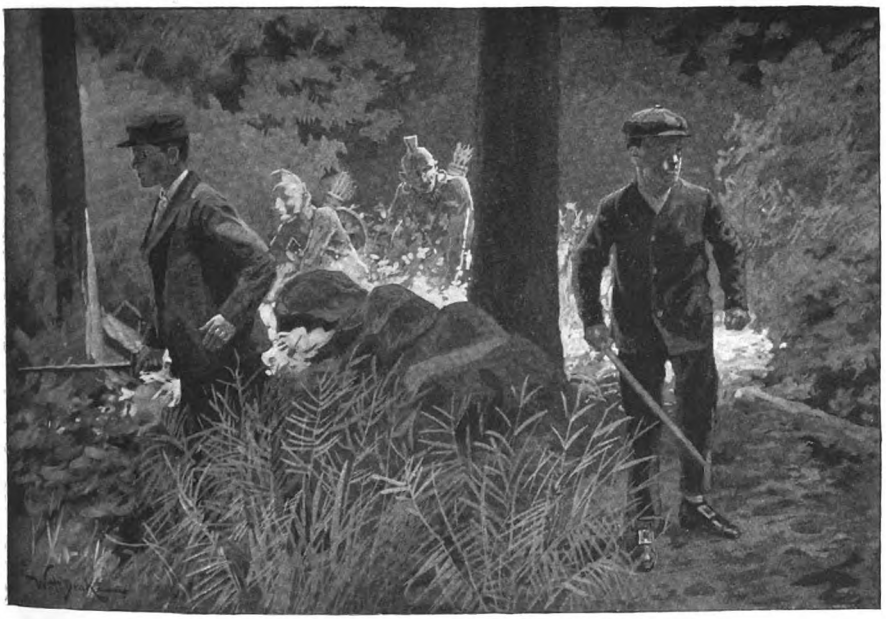
in good trim. Yet not through all the period of its prime, nor through those following years, did the parents of the members of our order — nor did those airy Indians whom we had dreaded — ascertain the fact of its existence. The whole affair was like a dusky charcoal drawing on a stray, forgotten sheet laid away in the recesses of our minds. What endless galleries of such twilight pictures are stored up in the brains of boys and men! And, unknown though it be to the rest of the world, it is all still as intense and clear as possible to the rest of us. That terrible moment when Willard Jones's whoop rang upon our ears in the vaulted darkness of the woods, and the fearful secrecy of our innocent gloom, and the deep shadow of our entirely inane proceedings altogether, linger with us now, and form a sober background to the recollections of our boyhood.

I met Bob Hanks, the Judge of Probate, only the other day: a dry, methodical man, with a forehead full of patient wrinkles. "Rat" Burnham, too, I have seen frequently. He is making a fortune by his curative facility in treating diseases of the eye, and never refers to that dark episode of our immaturity. The President of the Gas Company, once so full of frolic and fancy, is now one of the most preoccupied and even mournful-looking men in town; and the Bank Director has fallen a prey to dividends and coupons.



THE PRESIDENT OF THE GAS COMPANY AND THE BANK DIRECTOR.

Can it be that the solemn remembrance of our juvenile recklessness weighs upon them all, and makes them look so sad and careworn? As I say, we rarely speak of Our Secret Society, in these days. But the organization was never dissolved; and I am wondering whether we still belong to it.

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